

Rules of the Game

All About Grappling (Part One)

By Skip Williams



Many a **D&D** character has gone down to defeat while writhing in an opponent's grasp. Unfortunately, many a **D&D** game has come to a grinding halt as the DM and players struggled with the **grappling** rules. This article can't do much about the mayhem that ensues when big a monster grabs your character, but it can ease the confusion surrounding the grappling rules.

Grappling Basics

Everyone knows that grappling involves **grabbing** a foe and holding on, but it's a trifle more complicated than that. Here is an overview of the basics:

- A grapple **attack** begins with grabbing a foe.

You can't grapple anything until you get your hands on it first. For most **player characters**, grabbing a foe for a grapple attack requires a successful **melee touch attack**.

The grab provokes an **attack of opportunity** from the foe being grabbed. If the attack of opportunity hits and deals **damage**, the grab automatically fails (see page 156 in the *Player's Handbook*). If the attack of opportunity doesn't hit, or if it hits and deals no damage (as it might if the target has **damage reduction**), it doesn't automatically defeat the grab, but the grab still fails if the melee touch attack fails.

- An opposed grapple check follows a successful grab.

Once you grab someone, you must establish a hold, and you do that by making an opposed grapple check against your foe. The rules say the opposed grapple check that follows a successful grab is a **free action** for you, but it's really not an **action** at all. You make the grapple check as part of the attack you used to make the grab. Likewise, the opposed check your foe makes to resist you is not an action for him.

A grapple check is just like a **melee attack roll**, except that a special **size** modifier replaces your normal size **modifier**. In regular **melee** combat, smaller creatures get both an attack **bonus** and an **Armor Class** bonus. When grappling, the advantage goes to the bigger opponent. Table 7-1 in the *Monster Manual* shows size modifiers for regular and grappling combat. Page 156 in the *Player's Handbook* also shows special size modifiers for grappling.

Because a grapple check is an opposed check, the combatant with the higher total wins the check. If the check is a tie, the combatant with the highest total grapple modifier (base attack bonus + Strength modifier + special size modifier + any miscellaneous that might apply). If there is a tie and both combatants have the same grapple modifier, roll again to break the tie.

If you win the opposed check, you deal unarmed strike damage to your foe (1d3 points of nonlethal

damage for most **Medium** characters) and you have your foe in your grasp.

If you lose the opposed check, your foe avoids your grasp.

- You can maintain a hold on a foe from **round** to round.

Once you establish a hold on a foe (by grabbing that foe and then winning the ensuing opposed grapple check) you can keep holding on by moving into the foe's **space**. This movement is free for you (it doesn't count against your **speed** for the current round), but it provokes attacks of opportunity from foes that **threaten** you (but not from the foe you have in your grasp).

You can enter your foe's space even if your relative sizes would normally keep you from ending your move in that foe's space or even passing through that space (see page 148 in the *Player's Handbook*).

- Grappling has consequences.

You're grappling whenever you have a foe in your grasp or vice versa.

When you're grappling, you don't threaten any squares, not even the square you're in.

You lose your **Dexterity** bonus to AC (if you have one) against opponents you aren't grappling. (You can still use it against opponents you are grappling.)

You can't move while grappling unless you first win an opposed grapple check, and even then you have to drag your opponent along with you (see Part Two).

You share your foe's space when you're grappling. If you and your foe are different sizes, use the larger of the two space entries. Any attack that can reach the shared space can hit you. You don't get cover from a foe you're grappling, but any ranged attack aimed into your shared space has an equal chance to strike you or the creature you're grappling. Roll randomly to determine which creature a ranged attack strikes (see note 3 on Table 8-6 in the *Player's Handbook*). If you use a weapon against a foe you're grappling (see Part Two), you don't have to roll to determine the target you actually attack.

- Grappling has size limits.

You can grab a creature of any size, but you cannot establish or maintain a hold on a creature that is two or more size categories bigger than you. For example, if you're a Medium creature, you can establish a hold only on a creature of Large size or smaller. Huge or bigger creatures are too big for you to grapple.

- You make opposed checks many times when grappling.

When someone is trying to do something to you in a grapple, such as establish a hold, deal damage, or use your own weapon against you, you and your foe make opposed checks. An opposed grapple check you make to resist something your foe does is not an action for you, and you can make the opposed check even when you're flat footed or it isn't your turn.

Common Misconceptions about Grappling

You'll find that many of your problems with grappling will vanish if you avoid these common misconceptions:

- You're helpless when a foe has you in a hold, or when a foe has you pinned.

You lose your Dexterity bonus to Armor Class (if any) when grappling (even when it's you doing the holding), but you're not helpless. If you've been pinned (see Part Three), you have more troubles, but a pinned character isn't helpless, either.

Because a grappling or pinned creature is not helpless, it is not subject to the **coup de grace** special attack action.

- If you lose an opposed grapple check while holding on to a foe, your foe automatically escapes.

It is true that you must win an opposed grapple check to establish a hold right after you've grabbed a foe. Once you've established a hold, however, you keep holding on until you release your foe or your foe escapes. When you begin your turn with a foe in your grasp, you can make an opposed grapple check to accomplish many things, including damaging or pinning your foe (see Parts Two and Three). If you fail the opposed check, you don't accomplish whatever you were trying to do, but your failure doesn't release your foe.

- If you win an opposed grapple check while a foe is holding on to you, you escape.

If you begin your turn in a foe's grasp, you can escape by making and winning an opposed grapple check. If you fail, you don't escape. During your foe's turn, you might have to make additional opposed grapple check to resist whatever your foe tries to do to you. Winning such a check merely foils whatever the foe was trying to do, but you don't escape unless you use an action on your own turn to escape.

Grappling Requirements

The rules don't go into much detail about when you're capable of making grapple attacks. Common sense, however, suggests a few minimal requirements.

Because grappling involves grabbing and holding a foe, you need both hands to do it.

Since most shields in the **D&D** game are strapped to your forearm, you can let go of the shield and use your shield hand for grappling. You can grab or hold a foe with a buckler strapped to your arm at no penalty. A light shield imposes a -1 penalty on grapple checks you make offensively. A heavy shield imposes a -2 penalty. You can't initiate a grapple while using a tower shield. Your shield doesn't affect any grapple checks you make defensively (such as check to escape a foe's hold).

Creatures that lack manipulative appendages can make grapple attacks if they have body parts they can wrap around foes or some means of clamping down on a target. For example, a snake can grapple by biting and wrapping its body around a foe.

What's Next?

That covers the basics of grappling. Next time, we'll look at the options you have in grappling combat.

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of ***Dragon Magazine*** for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

©1995-2005 Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Wizards is headquartered in Renton, Washington, PO Box 707, Renton, WA 98057.

Based on the original **Dungeons & Dragons®** game by E. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson and on the new edition of the **Dungeons & Dragons** game designed by Jonathan Tweet, Monte Cook, Skip Williams, Richard Baker, and Peter Adkison. **D&D**, **Dungeons & Dragons**, and **Forgotten Realms** are registered trademarks owned by Wizards of the Coast, Inc. All Wizards characters, character names, and the distinctive likenesses thereof are trademarks owned by Wizards of the Coast, Inc. This material is protected under the laws of the United States of America. Any reproduction of or unauthorized use of the material or artwork contained herein is prohibited without the express written permission of Wizards of the Coast, Inc. This product is a work of fiction. Any similarity to actual people, organizations, places, or events is purely coincidental. This Wizards of the Coast game product contains no Open Game Content. No portion of this work may be reproduced in any form without written permission. To learn more about the Open Gaming License and the d20 System License, please visit **www.wizards.com/d20**. ©2001-2005 Wizards of the Coast, Inc. All rights reserved. Made in the U.S.A.

Visit our website at www.wizards.com/dnd